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FOR EAP/ANP

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SUBJECT: NEW SOLOMON ISALNDS PM WALKS ON THE WILD SIDE

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CLASSIFIED BY: Robert Fitts, Ambassador, AMB, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) SUMMARY: The new Solomon Islands Parliament voted Manasseh Sogavare in as Prime Minister May 4. Sogavare had brought the previous, very short lived, PM down by deserting to the opposition coalition following rioting in the capital. Sogavare has been PM before, following the June 2000 collapse of the then government in ethnic rioting. His government's performance at that time does not auger well for the stability needed now. Neither do early indications that he wants to reassess the role of RAMSI and abolish the central bank. He apparently also intends to shift recognition from Taipei to Beijing. END SUMMARY

2.(U) By a vote of 28 to 22, the newly elected Solomon Islands Parliament confirmed Manasseh Sogavare (So gah VA ray) as Prime Minister. Two supporters of the coalition behind him voted from jail, where they await trial for inciting the violence that ruined much of the retail district in Honiara and drove out much of the Chinese business community. Before entering politics, Sogavare was a civil servant working in the Finance Ministry. Post will e-mail his CV and photo to EAP/ANP.

BEEN THERE BEFORE

3.(C) Sogavare has been there before. He was selected as Prime Minister in June 2000 after then PM had to resign under pressure from ethnic militias. The government he led at the time was able to do little to stem the violence and deterioration of public institutions despite the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement and the arrival of an international observer mission. His government did, however, earn a reputation for an unusual level of corruption and ineffectiveness.

BACKGROUND: THE HATFIELD-MCCOY FACTOR

4.(SBU) Migrants from the island of Malaita form the bulk of the population on Honiara, which is on the island of Guadalcanal. Tension between the two populations has been at the root of much of the violence then and now. In 2000, Guadalcanal militias had been attacking rural Maliatans. A Malaitan militia forced the PM (ironically a Malaitan) to resign leading to Sogavare's ascension. This time around, a mixed but largely Malaitan opposition reacted with fury to the selection of a member of the previous government as PM and wasted Chinatown on the widely believed proposition that the government had been funded by Taiwan. Sogavare defected from the new government, reportedly after being offered the PM slot.

NEIGHBORS SHOW CONCERN

5.(C) The Melanesian Spearhead Group (PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu,

Solomon Islands, and the native group in New Caledonia) are trying to arrange a Ministerial level delegation visit to Honiara on May 8 in order to assess the situation and engage early with the new government. The delegation would be led by PNG FM Namaliu. We are told that the MSG has yet to receive a response. Indeed, Sogavare will likely be very busy hammering out a cabinet from his disparate coalition.

COMING TIMES MAY BE INTERESTING

6.(C) Early indications are that Sogavare may stir the pot a bit after nearly three years of calm following the Australian-led RAMSI intervention. He says he intends to reassess relations with Taiwan. (The coalition behind him reportedly received funds from Beijing. He probably didn't, at least until he split from the Taiwan-funded coalition.) A point of concern, he has spoken of the need to reassess RAMSI's role. As one of the most prominent members of his coalition is in a RAMSI jail for inciting the violence, the reassessment may not wholly endorse RAMSI's role. (Note: that member is also permanently barred from the US for his role in the 2000 violence.) Finally, Sogavare has been remarking around town on his intention to disband the Central Bank. The Central Bank is one of the few Solomon Islands institutions to maintain some credibility through the years of violence. Perhaps Sogavare retains some grudge from his work at the Bank in the early 90's.

COMMENT: EARLY INDICATIONS ARE ONLY THAT

7.(C) Solomon Islanders have had another taste of politically fed violence and they presumably have renewed their appetite for calm. RAMSI remains hugely popular with the citizenry. Presumably these forces will work to constrain the new coalition. Also, Sogavare has long been a bit of a firebrand, enjoying making confrontational statements more than the long slog to back them up.

8.(C) However, the politicians are beginning to be less

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welcoming than the public to the RAMSI supervision. This isn't just on the new government's side. RAMSI was widely seen (and in some quarters derided) for taking a role which bolstered the initially elected (pro-Taiwan) coalition. But their PM, never a RAMSI supporter, demanded the recall of the Australian High Commissioner over a leaked RAMSI e-mail which seemed to show Australia taking a deep interest in who was elected.

9.(C) RAMSI, and Australia, may well find its role in Solomon Islands more complicated in the months to come.

FITTS